

The hypnoglyph, 2008

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Hypnoglyphs ?

The hypnoglyph is a thing of mystery, seductive and dangerous. Sitting on a table, it proves an irresistible attraction to your eye, then your hand. You run your fingers over it, caress it. It draws you in. Unable to look away, you fall into a gentle trance. You'll soon fall victim to a predator.

The word hypnoglyph comes from the Greek words *glyph*, meaning symbol or shape - as in hieroglyphics - and *hypnos*, for sleep or loss of consciousness. It was coined in the early 1950s by John Anthony, whose real name was John Ciardi, an American editor and poet who translated *The Divine Comedy* into English. It's the title of a memorable short story, republished several times since.

The first time I saw the sculptures of Jean-Christophe Couradin - quite by chance, as with all true discoveries - I immediately thought of that story, which I read fifty years earlier. The hypnoglyph in the story comes from another world, another planet, where it's used as a tactile lure. Couradin's works or at least the rare woods from which they are extracted, come from only slightly less far away. They have exotic names and provenances, like snakewood from Guyana, cocobolo from Mexico, the splendidly veined, almost mineral green lignum vitae (a wood so dense it doesn't float), pink ivory from South Africa, malgaro from Madagascar, rosewood from Rio, ebony from Makassar, Africa or Indonesia, kingwood from Brazil, and several varieties of mahogany, like the increasingly rare mahogany from Cuba, once used to build darkrooms because of its great stability. A real tour of our own planet, if not another one.

The shapes also speak to me of mysterious origins. Admittedly, they make me think of certain works by Brancusi, and of the objects with which Yves Tanguy filled his undersea paintings. Roger Caillois, who collected minerals because they fueled his imagination, would have loved them. Yet Couradin's works don't fall within any tradition that is identifiable - at least not by me - except perhaps in nature. They remind me of the spires of seashells from warm deep seas that look like otherworldly fruits or eggs, or sometimes even the outline of the genitals or a half-open bivalve. Of course, the artist had no such models, nor even any such intentions. I'm projecting my own images, my own fantasies, onto these rounded shapes. They nonetheless exude a powerful, confident sensuality through their substance, their color, and their shine, so perfect it would make them look like hard stones were it not for the warmth of the wood.

Unlike most sculptors (and indeed all museums) who forbid touching these surfaces, Jean-Christophe Couradin highly recommends it. Follow his advice. Your eyes are urging you to. Move your hand closer. Stroke the object with your fingers. With the flat of your palm. And finally, caress it. You are seduced. You're caught. You're done for.

A hypnoglyph. Don't say I didn't warn you.